

4.0 FOREST LAND PLANNING POLICY ALTERNATIVES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how the department intends to plan for future activities on state forest land. The objectives range from road building and timber harvesting to wildlife protection and historic preservation. In order to execute these objectives properly, the department must develop planning tools by which it can evaluate various options and their environmental impacts.

4.2 DISCUSSION OF LANDSCAPE PLANNING POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Policy No. 16: Landscape Planning

The preferred policy states:

The department will develop plans by setting management objectives for specified landscapes consistent with the Forest Resource Plan.

Three other alternatives were considered by the department.

Alternative 1: The department will use watersheds and other blocks of land as the basic planning unit for forest management activities. (current policy)

Alternative 2: The department will prepare and use individual plans for specific activities to implement the Forest Resource Plan.

Alternative 3, the no-policy option, would allow the department to plan on an ad hoc basis without making a specific commitment to implement the Forest Resource Plan in any particular way.

Background

Landscape planning involves setting specific management objectives for a block of land or logical landscape, watershed or ecological unit. These areas will likely range from a few hundred acres to several thousand acres. Objectives will include timber harvest, protection of wildlife habitat, construction of roads and other subjects addressed by the plan.

The department's current policy has been to use the "block planning" process to develop plans for specific tracts of land. In total, about five block plans have been prepared or are in the process of being written. The areas covered by these plans are Tiger Mountain (King County), Van Zandt (Whatcom), Yacolt (Clark and Skamania Counties), Tahuya (Mason) and Elbe Hills (Pierce).

In the past, the department used citizen advisory committees and other forms of public involvement to help develop these block plans. The purpose of the block planning process was to provide the field forester with specific information from which to make decisions. In most cases, however, the block plans ended up re-examining policies described in the Forest Land Management Program (1984) rather than developing objectives to be implemented in the field. More than 12 separate elements (typically prepared by different divisions within the department) were usually required to implement a single block plan. As a result, site-specific activities were often carried out with poorly-defined multiple objectives. In sum, this approach turned out to be costly and slow to implement. As a result, only a small fraction of the contemplated block plans has been completed.

The department intends to better integrate the various components that it must consider in managing state forest land. The department intends to accomplish this goal by using the Geographic Information System (GIS), an electronic data processing system, to generate detailed maps. The GIS displays physical information, such as soil types, roads and wildlife habitat locations, on a computer map. A series of overlapping layers of information allows easier access and simplifies revisions. Landscape-level maps and supporting information will contain specific objectives for department activities.

Figure 2 shows the new planning process, which will allow the department to more effectively consider key nontimber resources, such as fish and wildlife, before making management decisions. For more information regarding the planning process, see the discussion section in the Forest Resource Plan.

The Department's Forest Land Planning Process



Comparison of Alternatives and Environmental Impacts

The **preferred policy** requires the department to plan its activities based on logical landscapes or biological units. The planning size will probably be smaller than the blocks considered in Alternative 1. The preferred policy, however, does not require the department to publish formal, written plans, . Rather, the department intends to use the GIS to generate detailed maps that will analyze economic and environmental conditions. The maps and management objectives will be available to the public.

Alternative 1, the current block planning process, focuses on large contiguous ownership blocks or drainages. The plan contains a broad program policy to meet the needs of the block in question. The current process, however, does not establish landscape-level objectives or successfully integrate operational plans for the field forester. In contrast with the preferred policy, this alternative does not require the department to analyze the cumulative impacts of harvesting on other nontimber resources, such as watersheds and wildlife.

In Alternative 2, the department would only prepare plans for specific activities (such as road building, timber harvesting etc.). When developed, these plans would comply with all federal, state and local laws, address any local concerns for the project(s), conform to policies outlined in the Forest Resource Plan and adopt a useable format for use by the department's regional offices. But the department believes this level of planning would be incomplete because it would not deal with broader, landscape-level activities, such as protecting riparian management zones, wildlife or other key nontimber resources. Most plans would not contain long-term direction to the field but would only address the specific activity at hand.

Alternative 3, the no-policy option, would provide field managers with maximum flexibility but would not establish statewide goals or consistency between regions. Under this policy, there would be no basis for monitoring programs described in the Forest Resource Plan and no commitment or assurance to integrate effective management of nontimber resources, such as wildlife.

The preferred policy and alternatives apply only to department planning procedures and do not require the department to undertake a specific activity in the field. As a result, there are no significant adverse environmental impacts that can be quantified at the present time.

The department believes the **preferred policy** will allow it to consider more fully the environmental impacts of its activities and to set important objectives for nontimber resources. Should a plan constitute a non-exempt agency action, it will be subject to review under the State Environmental Policy Act (see Policy No. 18, SEPA Review).

Policy No. 17: Soliciting Information

The preferred policy states:

The department will solicit comments from interested parties, including local neighborhoods, tribes and government agencies when preparing landscape-level objectives.

Two other alternatives were considered by the department.

Alternative 1: The department will invite public involvement only when reconciling forest resource management conflicts.

Alternative 2, the no-policy option, would allow the field manager to decide whether and when to involve the public. There would be no statewide standards and no programmatic effort to solicit comments.

Background

In the past, the department dealt with conflicts or controversies on a case-by-case basis. This has resulted in some inefficiencies and missed opportunities. The policy was drafted to correct the situation and encourage the involvement of the public, and particularly adjacent land owners, in the department's planning process.

Comparison of Alternatives and Environmental Impacts

The **preferred policy** requires the department to initiate a public dialogue with interested parties and solicit comments early on in the department's planning effort. As part of this process, the department will identify potential areas where land sales or exchanges are appropriate, or where department-managed land is near sensitive areas, such as the Columbia River Gorge or a wild and scenic river. (In the case of the Gorge, the department has already identified land that it plans to exchange, and the process is underway to remove the department from ownership in this area.)

Under Alternative 1, the department would solicit comments and work to identify and resolve resource conflicts or unacceptable environmental problems only when conflicts arose. The department, under this alternative, would adopt a passive position and wait until the public objected to certain activities before it held public meetings and solicited a broader spectrum of views.

Alternative 2, the no-policy option, would leave the extent and timing of public involvement to the field manager. There would not be a consistent, statewide effort to solicit public review.

The preferred policy and alternatives do not have significant adverse impacts to the environment. By adopting a more open planning process (**preferred policy**), the department believes it will establish better relationships with the public and will likely obtain more complete information on which to base its decisions.

4.3 DISCUSSION OF STATE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT ALTERNATIVES

Policy No. 18: SEPA Review

The department will conduct a SEPA review when subsequent plans and activities constitute a non-exempt agency action under the Act. (current policy)

Background

The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) is intended to ensure that environmental values are considered by state and local government officials when making decisions. The department intends to comply fully with this statute. The department has not considered any alternatives for this preferred policy. The policy requires the department to meet or exceed the requirements of SEPA.

Environmental Impacts

This policy is procedural only and creates no significant adverse environmental impacts. It is designed to ensure that the department follows SEPA in assessing the environmental impacts of its activities on state forest land. This final environmental impact statement (FEIS) was prepared pursuant to these requirements.

4.4 DISCUSSION OF AQUATIC SYSTEMS POLICY ALTERNATIVES

The department's primary goal is to conserve and enhance the natural resources of state forest land while meeting its trust obligations. Accomplishing this goal requires the department to integrate nontimber issues into its management decisions. The following paragraphs describe how the department intends to consider the effects of its activities on aquatic systems (watersheds, riparian management areas and wetlands).

Policy No. 19: Watershed Analysis

The preferred policy states:

The department will analyze by watershed the effects of past, proposed and reasonably foreseeable future activities on water quality and quantity, and it will modify operations to control risks to public resources and trust interests.

Three other alternatives were considered by the department.

Alternative 1: The department will give careful consideration to how nontimber resources within a drainage are affected when deciding the size, distribution and timing of clearcut units. (current policy).

Alternative 2: The department in its management activities will give careful consideration to how water quantity impacts are affected by past, proposed, and future forest practices and other activities within watersheds.

Alternative 3, the no-policy option, would allow the department to address the effects of past, proposed and reasonably foreseeable future activities on water quantity and quality when required by the Forest Practices Act and regulations.

Background

The department's block and drainage plans (see Policy No. 16) have been the traditional vehicle by which it analyzed the impacts of its activities in water resources. The department now intends to develop a new and more efficient planning process to better integrate nontimber resources into its overall forest planning effort. One of the resources at question in landscape level objectives is water.

The department will analyze water resources by examining the cumulative effects of its actions on watersheds (the area drained by a river or network of rivers and which often includes domestic or public water supplies). This analysis will focus on the environmental impacts of the activity at a particular site, but it may also include an analysis of the cumulative effects of the activity on the downstream environment. The scope of the analysis will depend on the type of activity, the public resources at risk, the existing conditions and other factors.

Until recently, the Forest Practices Act and its regulations did not deal with the cumulative effects of department activities and the forest practices of adjacent landowners on water resources. In October 1991, however, the Forest Practices Board adopted an interim regulation that requires the department to examine the effects of its activities on certain watersheds.

The department has undertaken some cooperative water resources planning efforts in the past. In the Nisqually watershed (Pierce and Thurston County), for instance, the department worked with adjacent landowners to produce a management plan that addressed water quality and quantity problems. The department anticipates that this type of cooperative effort may be used on other watersheds.

Comparison of Alternatives and Environmental Impacts

The **preferred policy** differs from the current policy and the alternatives by requiring an analysis of the risks to public resources and trust interests. Risk assessment is based on the probability and degree of effects on water resources within a particular watershed. If the risk is determined unacceptable, the department will modify its management activities in a manner which may exceed forest practice regulations.

Implementing the **preferred policy** will reduce the chance of environmental damage to water resources from erosion, unplanned surface water movement, mass wasting, soil instability and other effects. The policy should be analyzed in conjunction with Policy No. 16, Landscape Planning, which requires the department to establish specific management objectives for logical landscapes or ecological units, such as watersheds and riparian areas. By conducting the risk analysis described in the policy, the department will be able to detect the potential impacts of its activities earlier than if other alternatives were adopted. The overriding goal is to analyze and, if necessary, modify proposed activities in the watershed.

Alternative 1, current policy, requires the department to consider the effects of clearcuts on nontimber resources. It will not have a significant adverse impact on the environment but compared with the preferred policy this option is a weaker alternative. It does not require a risk analysis of all nontimber resources and does not integrate other department activities (such as road construction) into the analysis.

Alternative 2 is more specific than the current policy because it focuses on water quantity (but not water quality). This alternative, however, does not require the department to conduct a risk analysis on all watersheds, nor does it require the department to emphasize water quality in its analysis. It, too, will not have a significant adverse impact on the environment but it is a weaker option than the preferred policy because it only examines select nontimber resources (water quantity) rather than a broad range of resources.

Alternative 3, the no-policy option, allows the department to operate without planning on a watershed level. Risk analyses are required by current Forest Practices Act regulations on certain watersheds. The practice would continue if this alternative were adopted, but the department would not exceed the current regulations, as the preferred policy requires.

Policy No. 20: Riparian Management Zones

The preferred policy states:

The department will establish riparian management zones along Type 1-4 waters and when necessary along Type 5 waters. The department will focus its efforts on protecting key nontimber resources, such as water quality, fish, wildlife habitat and sensitive plant species.

Three other alternatives were considered by the department.

Alternative 1: The department will avoid serious damage to Type 1-3 waters and will protect Type 4 waters as needed. This protection focuses on water quality and quantity, fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics, endangered, threatened, and sensitive plant species, and native wetland vegetation. (current policy)

Alternative 2: The department will protect the integrity of Type 1-5 waters. This protection focuses on water quality and quantity, fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics, endangered, threatened and sensitive plant species, and native wetland vegetation.

Alternative 3, the no-policy option, would allow the department to comply with the minimum legal requirements but would not require it to do more.

Background

Riparian areas (rivers, streams, lakes and adjacent land) are a resource that is protected by state regulation. Although some timber harvest activities are allowed near riparian areas, the Forest Practices Act regulations create riparian management zones to provide a buffer between timber harvest and the rivers or streams in question. The Act classifies waters into five types. Type 1 refers to major navigable and fish-bearing waters, such as the Skagit River. Type 5 refers to small waters, which may dry up for a portion of the year.

Many wildlife species rely on riparian areas for all or a major part of their lives. Riparian areas provide thermal and escape cover; they also serve as a major source of food and water. Large organic debris (LOD) -- usually fallen trees -- create riffles and pools in streams, and provide protection and habitat for fish. Wall-based channels in riparian areas also provide habitat for overwintering juvenile salmon. In addition, riparian areas provide travel corridors for wildlife.

Comparison of Alternatives and Environmental Impacts

Under the **preferred policy**, the department will provide more protection for riparian areas than the Forest Practices Rules and regulations require if it is necessary to protect water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and sensitive plant species and wetland vegetation.

The department's general approach will follow the Forest Practices regulations. In addition to the protection now required for many riparian areas, the department will also protect Type 4 waters and, if necessary, Type 5 waters.

Under the **preferred policy**, Type 5 waters will receive similar consideration presently given to Type 4 waters. The size of the buffer zone will vary with site conditions. Timber management priorities within the riparian management zones will meet the needs of these resources and habitats. The preferred policy therefore provides significantly greater environmental protection than current policy.